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ABSTRACT

The writing assignments developed for a course in expository writing intended for gifted eighth grade students are described in this paper. The first assignment described is a causal analysis essay that required the students to examine events from their lives or from newspaper articles and analyze the causes of the actions involved. The paper details the prewriting activities that accompanied this assignment, including "content helpers," which were designed to help the students discover errors in causal reasoning, and "writing stimulators," which asked the students to examine their past behavior, present condition, or future choices and to make connections among experiences and ideas. The second assignment described in the paper is a research project that required the students to interview someone and closely observe and analyze the responses. The last assignment described required the students to locate and analyze a problem and to offer solutions to that problem. Copies of student essays illustrating each assignment are included. (FL)

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TEACHING THE GIFTED: WRITING AS LEARNING

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In July of 1980, I was requested by the Bureau of Language Arts of the Chicago Board of Education to develop a course in expository writing for fifteen gifted eighth graders. These were studens who had scored in the ninety fifth percentile in verbal ability on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and between 200 to 600 in verbal ability on the Scholastic Aptitude Test. The average high school junior or senior usually scores about 368 on the verbal section. More than half of these students scored at least 360. The course however, was not to be an ordinary expository writing course because it was to include reading as an equal partner. The reading aspect of the course, is not included in this essay. As I began to think about the course, I worried about the content, the format, the students' actual writing abilities and the pacing and sequencing of the content.

After weeks of fretting and worrying, it became increasingly clear that the course design would have to be experimental. I realized that my task would be akin to that of a field investigator or an anthropologist; I would poke around in many different directions - observing, searching, experminenting with diverse techniques and methodologies. I not only wanted my students to produce effective written products but to provide them with numerous opportunities to use language fully and richly in many situations.

I began with the assumption that writing is a way of knowing---a way of shaping experience into coherent meaningful language. The writer receives a stimulus that initiates the writing act forcing the writer to engage in mental activities that lead to discoveries about the intended message. In doing so, he reexamines his experiences and knowledge and gains new insights and fresh treatments of old thoughts. New discoveries are made about the numerous relationships existing between the language and the message. (Perl,1980) observes that discovery in writing means that "we end up with a process that lifts out or explicates or enlarges our experience." In this sense, writing is a powerful learning activity --- one that allows students to gain access to information that already exists but they for some reason are unable to retrieve. Writing not only permits them to recover the information but to organize and fashion it into a cohesive message.

I reasoned that though these twelve and thirteen years old had actual verbal abilities of high school juniors and seniors, their actual writing abilities might not be as superior. Both the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and the Scholastic Aptitude Test measure recognition of usage, grammatical, and syntactical structures. These tests do not measure actual writing behavior though the literature

suggests that such tests as these do possess some predictive qualities. While these students had participated in varied and extensive reading programs and in some creative writing ventures, none had been exposed to a structured writing program. Nor had they been subjected to a great many expository writing experiences.

Most important, by nature expository writing entails a gathering and probing of data that demands some degree of distance between the reader and the subject matter (Moffett, 1968).

As Moffett argues, it is the distance between the writer and the subject matter that distinguishes narration from exposition. He further maintains that children's writing is grounded in narration because their abstractive powers are unable "to conceptualize and interrelate intangible things" - object and ideas that are not apart of their direct experiences are different for them to conceptualize. A final reason that Moffett offers for children having more difficulty with exposition is that they are frequently unable to objectify their feelings and discuss them.

I theorized that the subject matter of writing assignments had to be personalized. By nature, expository writing is less author-centered. Rather than recording observations or composing memories of past events, exposition places

different demands on the writer, who must work exclusively with second-hand data. When the data is experienced directly, it has to be sifted through summarized, placed into categories, made into inferences and further categorized. In this process, the writer becomes increasingly anonymous as the subject matter becomes central (Moffett, 1968). To enhance the students' abstractive powers, I determined that the subject matter should be based on their experiences and firsthand observations of people, events and places in the home, at school and in the community. Occasionally, data from secondhand sources in the form of interview, surveys would be transformed into investigative reports. Investigative reports would also be based on extensive use of the library and the use of books and documents containing and synthesization of other's research and ideas.

I further determined that the curriculum had to be adjusted to account for all of these elements including the potential disparity between verbal ability and writing practice. To bring these diverse yet related elements together, the curriculum had to reflect the naturalness of the writing process and the inherent language ability that these children possessed. Hence, clear objectives had to be set and writing tasks had to be carefully planned and sequenced. The tasks had to lead from simple to complex and from personal commentaries and observations about oneself to

short investigative reports. These tasks, though they were imposed, also had to follow a natural sequence that lead children naturally from one assignment to the next.

Moreover, the writing tasks had to illustrate the topic the content and scope of the assignment. The tasks had to specify the demands placed on the writers and indicate how the student was to proceed in completing the assignment by outlining strategies that lead to the completion of the final product. Glatthorn (P.103) notes that in developing a composition assignment, teachers need to identify the knowledge and skills the students need to begin the particular assignment.

A typical assignment from the first thread writing about oneself and others asked students to write a casual analysis essay. Two types of prewriting activities were given. The first, content helpers, as the name implies, are those activities that help students to make discoveries about the content. In this instance, the activities dealt with finding causes and events. Students were given situations from their daily lives, along with short news articles and were told to analyze the causes of the person's action or the event. Next, they were given explanation of errors in causal reasoning, for instance - fallacies of the single cause, post hoc, and hasty generalizations. Again, the

newspaper was an excellent source of fallacies with numerous examples taken from news stories and letters to the editor.

The second type of prewriting activities, the writing stimulators, are directly related to writing. The first assignment in this series directed students to examine their past behavior, present condition or future choices. This assignment, though seemingly complicated had one obvious advantage: the students used themselves for research and hence, increased their self knowledge. The assignment forced students to do more than recall simple facts about their lives. They were compelled to analyze and make connections about experiences and ideas that had been dormant. They also had to retrieve information from their observation or memories to abstract from them, to establish relationships, to form generalizations and to write about them.

The first of the writing stimulators required the students to complete a personal causal analysis chart which enabled them to analyze the causes of their behavior or a physical trait.

PERSONAL CAUSAL ANALYSIS

Aspect	Identify	Causes	----
Personality Trait	Shy	Parents Childhood	 no
Physical Trait	Thin	Heredity Diet Exercise	no no
Career Choise	Medicine	Grandfather interest in science desire to help people	 no

Allan Glatthorn, et al. The Enligh Book: Composition Skills Book 3, Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1980 P. 136.

The next series of writing stimulators assisted them in developing the essay. Planning and beginning the essay, examining body paragraphs using a variety of methods to show causal analysis and concluding the essay effectively by explaining briefly their feelings or activities toward the behavior were also included in this series. The final assignment in this prewriting series is sketched below.

Self-Evaluation and Revision Checklist Assignment.

After you have completed the essay, evaluate it yourself using the checklist below. Then give it to another student and let him or her evaluate it. If either of you find areas of weakness, discuss the weakness, then revise the essay so that is represents your best efforts.

SELF-EVALUATION AND REVISION CHECKLIST: ESSAY OF CAUSAL ANALYSIS

Criterion	Evaluation		
	Does not meet criterion	Meets criterion	Excels in criterion
1. The essay shows good insight into the causes of the event discussed.			
2. The essay shows sound logic and reasoning.			
3. The essay begins effectively. It interests the reader and makes thesis clear.			
4. Causes are clearly identified. Each cause is fully developed and explained.			
5. Paragraphs have unity and show coherence.			
6. Sentences are constructed correctly and effectively.			
7. Words are used correctly. Effective word choices are made.			
8. Sentences are punctuated correctly.			
9. Words are spelled correctly.			
Overall Evaluation			

Glatthorn, et al. p 143.

To facilitate this peer evaluation procedure, I simply attached one or two extra sheets of blank paper and circulated each essay to several class members. Each student read each essay and wrote a paragraph of constructive comments about how revision was to proceed. Although students worked in small groups of two or three, I employed mini-conferences. The conferencing method of circulating from student to student permits more individualization. It allows the instructor and the students to discuss individual papers and individual steps of the writing process. The combination workshop and conferencing approach breaks down the traditional class lesson and allows students to proceed somewhat at their own pace. It provides on the spot responses to student writing by yielding peer feedback and comments from the instructor.

As a result of preparing the students for writing and engaging them in the writing process in a step by step procedure. I received a number of excellent essays. The one reproducted below is typical. The essay reflects the two stages of the prewriting process. In addition, it demonstrates how these prewriting activities enabled the student to analyze his behavior and to learn something about himself and writing.

WHY I WANT TO BE A PSYCHOLOGIST

What causes mental or physical exhaustion? Why do people feel lonely or in need of affection after a traumatic experience? I think I have the power to explore the world of people and their feelings. When I study psychology, maybe I can find out what makes people tick.

Science consists of many areas of study, for instance, biology, chemistry, botany or geology. However, my utlimate goal of study would have to be the social sciences. When I study the social sciences, I would like to learn what causes people to think in such a way that causes emotional stress. Why do people kill other people? Why are some people lonely? These are some of the questions I would like to read about and try to answer.

The main reason I chose this career was because of the support my Mom gave me. She didn't just brush me off and say, "Hey! That's a dumb idea!" Mom was the person who influenced me to make this career choice. She studies psychology at Chicago State University and is majoring in it. I would like to continue school like Mom and receive my P.H.D. My mother really gave me all the support I needed to make my career choice in psychology.

Another reason why I would like to be a psychologist is my ability to tell there is something on a person's mind. Very few people can come up to me and fool me about their feelings. I can see in a minute if something is bothering them. With this special talent and my training in psychology, I will try to answer the question: What causes mental depression?

The study of psychology is really fascinating. I believe if I try real hard I can succeed in this field. I have all the support I need from relatives, friends, and neighbors. The rest is up to me.

Vania Hudson

Another assignment given midway through the course involved the students in completing research, reporting and explaining the results of their labor. This assignment requiring them to interview live informants, entailed close observation and analysis of another's responses. The example below illustrates the specificity of the assignment sheet.

English Interview: Explaining Another's World

Assignment: Choose a person who is your grandparent's age. Interview that person about some aspect of his/her world. You might explore one of the following topics or a similar one.

Family Life Years Ago
Jobs and Careers that No Longer Exist
Old Time Amusement
Yesterday's Music
Requirements: In order to complete this assignment, you must:

1. Select a topic and an informant.
2. Frame a set of questions to ask the informant.
3. Become familiar with some interviewing techniques.
4. Interview the informant.
5. Take notes on the person's surroundings and appearance.
6. Use a tape recorder to record your informant's responses.
7. Sort through your notes and the tape recording. Choose the most interesting parts to include in your essay.
8. Choose an acceptable way of organizing
   You may use one of the following:
   question - answer format
   interview monologue
   interview profile
9. Write a draft and share it with a peer. Evaluate it according to criteria outlined under Evaluation Criteria.
10. Write the final copy.

Evaluation Criteria: Your essay will be evaluated by the following criteria:

1. The essay contains an introduction that provides backgroung information about the subject.
2. The essay follows an acceptable format.
3. The essay is clearly organized.
4. The content provides clear examples and explanations of the topic.
5. The essay is free to sentence, usage, spelling and punctuation errors.

The assignments lucidly describes what is expected of the students and helps the students to learn what is to be done. Each of the assignment's requirements was discussed in class with the instructor giving mini lectures, demonstrations and providing clear examples where appropriate. In addition students were given practice in interviewing each other and in sorting through and rearranging fragmented pieces of information.

Several examples of the student's attempts to complete the assignment are illustrated in the next few pages. The first is an example of perhaps the easiest organizational format. The student who wrote the essay below interviewed his father, who was a prisoner of war during World War II. The answers are fully developed containing a great amount of details and ample explanations.

ENGLISH INTERVIEW

The subject of my interview is my father, who served with the Allied Forces in World War II. He joined the Yugoslavian Army in 1941, when he was in a Prisoner of War camp.

I questioned him in a comfortable atmosphere (namely, our living room) about his experiences while he was a prisoner of war.
Following is the main of the discussion that ensued.

M*- How did you get captured?
F*- I was captured in a small village called Verba. You see, Yugoslavia was overun by troops at that time, and all of our soldiers were scattered or killed. I was trying to get back to my home in the east. To do this, I had to trade my uniform for a farmer's clothes so that I wouldn't be captured on sight. In fact, I had to go through part of the country, Croatia where all Serbians, civilians or soldiers were killed by a Croation political groups called the Ustasa. I had to pose as a Muslem, turban and all. Still, I was captured six times. To make a long story short, I managed to get away the first five times. The sixth time occured when I was walking through Verba. Waiting around the corner was a platoon of German soldiers, who captured every man that walked past. You see, the previous night, someone threw a grenade at a German car, killing four men. They wanted to be sure to catch the man who did it. At the end of the day, we were marched to their camp, about twenty kilometers away. From there we traveled from camp to camp by train, to Germany.
M*- What did they do with you when you arrived at the POW camp?
F*- I stayed in the camp for three days. During that time, we were washed and de-liced. Our clothes were disinfected and examined, and we were registered as prisoners! On the morning of the fourth day, 19 Serbians and I were taken to a village, In the tavern, we were divided up among the Germans and registered as prisoners! My number was "Stalag 7B KG5916," On the morning of the fourth day, 19 Serbians and I were taken to a village. In the tavern, we were divided up among the farmers as workers. From then on, each of us was taken to a farm in the morning, and we were taken back to Stalag 7B at night.
M*- Did you work at the same place during the whole war?

*M = Me
*F - Father

Branko Radosavljevic

In the next example: the student attempts an essay which demands a more thorough job of editing. The writer has to sense the salient features, choose a controlling idea and organize his thoughts around it. All uninteresting material or that which doesn't relate to the controlling idea has to be eliminated. The other material has to be organized around the controlling idea for clarity and logic. One of the major problems with this essay is the ending. The writer develops a conclusion that doesn't fully capture the controlling idea. While the conclusion may represent the writer's major impression of what he observed, it doesn't quite leave the reader with an overall expression of the ideas presented in the essay. Life in some respects, may have been simpler 30 years ago, but few people would argue that the racial discrimination and injustice that existed resulted in more fruitful living conditions for Blacks and other minorities.

INTERVIEW

Mrs Ollie Anderson is a plump, short woman with silky short, gray hair. She has a medium brown complexion and wears reading glasses. She lives in a large old house with peeling paint. She can't paint it herself and her sister's husband won't do it for her. He is elderly too. Mrs. Anderson is a widow. She was born in 1892 in Louisiana. She talks with a slight "country" accent, but has a vivid memory of life in Louisiana when she was a young girl. Black family life was hard in those days. The ones who lived on farms (most blacks) worked and lived on a land-owner's PROPERTY. They were called "sharecroppers" because when harvest-time came, they had to give the land-owner a portion of what was raised. There was a time to do activities every day, such as getting eggs and milk in the morning, working in the fields in the afternon, and preparing foods, and playing games, the evening.

Most people had very large families. Mrs. Anderson's had 17 people. If the fields had to be plowed or if other farm work had to be done, a boy might not go to school. He might spend the entire season working on the farm helping his parents.

Girls weren't allowed to do farm work like plowing the fields or picking cotton. Instead, they washed, ironed, cooked, cleaned, and sewed. Also, the older sister had to watch over the smaller ones. Girls were expected to marry and have children. Most of them became housewives and didn't seek professions or careers like today's women do. Parents were strict, and girls didn't have as many dating privileges as girls do today.

The weather was rarely cold. Most of the time, the weather was mild or hot. Because of the heat in he summer, the people wore thin cotton clothes. The girls had to wear dresses with lenghts that ranged from long to shirt.

There were no cats or dogs on Mrs. Anderson's farm. The only animals they had were chickens, pigs, and those which could be used for meat, to feed the family. The meat was sometimes preserved with salt. However, most of the time, all of the food that was prepared was eaten and not stored for a later day. There were also ice boxes to store milk and other spoilable foods.

Kimberly Nichols

The final assignment in the course is given below:

Is there a problem in your school, community church or synogague that you think needs improving? Is there some action that you think others should take to resolve this problem? Write a proposal to that person or persons asking that a specific action be taken.

At first glance, this assignment appears too complicated for eighth graders, gifted or not. It requires a number of complex skills. Among the more difficult are the ability to investigate a problem, to think of a probable solution and to determine approximate arguments and their feasibility. Specifically, however, the above assignment requires the student writer to (1) understand the purpose of persuasion, (2) use persuasive language effectively, (3) understand differenct persuasive appeals, (4) understand audience and to make judgements about the reader's knowledge, (5) shift perspectives and to see a task from another's point of view, (6) understand the basic parts of the essay (introduction, body, and conclusion) and apply them to writing a persuasive paper, (7) understand and apply the structure of an argument, (8) investigate or research a problem and to collect data.

This assignment just as others was divided into two related prewriting tasks. The first set of content related prewriting activities helped students to recognize and understand persuasive writing. In order to do so, students examined and wrote ads and commercials, paying close attention to the language and the type of appeals.

Since persuasive writing seeks to convince a person to take an action, the writing stimulators required students to locate an issue, particularly some improvement in their school, community, church or synagogue.
They were told to list the kind of improvement:
better use of space, saving time and money, better communication - that could possibly be used to improve each of these institutions.
As the students established the criteria and applied them to each of the institutions, they were able to identify areas of improvement and to determine the feasibility and effectiveness of ideas.

The next assignment in the writing stimulator's sequence required students to think through their improvement. In fact, the students were told that their work would consumate in a proposal that they would present to a particular audience, and in order to more effectively persuade their audience, they had to think the proposal through, identify the basic issues and work out the details. In order to do so, they completed the following form.

IMPROVEMENT PROPOSAL

Name of Proposer_____ Organization _____

Give a brief title to the proposal: _____

What problem is the proposal designed to solve?
Outline in some detail how you think your proposal would work.
By what date do you think your proposal could be put into effect?
Which people have the authority to approve or disapprove your proposal?
What special funds are needed to put your proposal into effect?
Which group or individual would be responsible for the improvement you are proposing?
What special rules would probably be needed to make the improvement work successfully?
Does the improvement require any changes in the way space and facilities are presently used? If so, what are they?
What problems might develop if the proposal is accepted? Tell how you would deal with them.
How would you evluate the effectiveness of the improvement you are proposing?

Gallthorn et al. Book 3. p.151.

Once this information was obtained, the students had a substantial amount of data before them. In fact, they had also formulated much of the basic support needed to write the essays. Nonetheless each student completed an audience analysis and examined factors such as race, age, sex, ethnic group, education, values, occupation and religions. As they examined these factors, they were able to make certain decisions about content and the language. Most of the students enjoyed this assignment because it allowed them to make projections about principals, teachers, ministers -- people with whom they had contact, but about whose lives they had never given any previous thought. Finally, they were introducted to the different types of appeals - the appeal to joy, shame, emulation and morality. From these appeals, they gained some insight into how they might structure their own arguments. As in the other writing assignments, students were lead through the steps of planning the essay, writing the introduction, structuring body paragraphs around arguments, writing a conclusion and utilizing peer and evaluations of the essay.

The following essay provides an excellent example of the final product.

A PROPOSAL FOR BETTER STUDY HABITS

Audience: Principal and Teachers

What can be done to get the children in our school to develop better study habits? Many students in our school are failing instead of passing to the next grade. Why? Because our school children don't have good study habits. I think this problem could be solved if our school developed a plan whereby the children can study at least one hour and a half each day.

The students in our school need a good, strong plan to help them improve their study habits. If students study at least one hour and a half each day, they can accomplish more. First, students should do assigned homework given to them the first hour and read a book the remaining half hour. Thus, the students can improve their vocabulary while reading and learning something from their assigned homework. Second, the teachers should make sure homework is given each night. The plan cannot be effective if homework is not given each night and the student doesn't have a book to read. Thirdly, each parent should supervise his child while the child is going homework. This is to make sure that the child does not try to get out of doing homework. If this plan were put into effect, there would be a great change academically. First, there would be improvement in studies. The students would develop better study habits, and learning would come easier for them. Second, there would be fewer failing students. If the students do their schoolwork and as stated before, follow the plan, the students would benefit from school.

As a result of what the student accomplished reading scores would improve. The school and the principal get a good reputation for supporting a plan that would help the students in their work. The plan that I've outlined for developing better study habits in the schools is very clear and reasonable. The principal and teachers should not only consider but implement it.

Vania Hudson

In this essay, the student has identified a problem among the students at her school. She also investigated alternative solutions, evaluated them, selected one and developed them into an essay. The writing tasks have carried her through a complete problem solving sequence which the essay itself reflects. The prewriting activities and the step by step sequenced have helped to underscore the success of the theme.

CONCLUSION

Any writing assignment can be a learning assignment if it allows students to investigate themselves and their environment. Through the process of discovering facts about themselves and others, students are lead through a rigorous process of analysis and synthesis that is far more complicated than writing ideas on paper. In the process of communicating an idea, the student is involved in a complicated network of skills and analysis that culminate in a final coherent finished product.

The teacher can facilitate the process by carefully analyzing each writing assignment and by thinking through the subtasks that are involved (the audience, sources of information, purpose of writing, developing arguments). Moreover, the teacher can develop activities that can guide the students' explorations of their subject matter, and supporting arguments. As the students complete these activities, they can test their assumptions and identify and rectify ideas that went astray.

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